



Congressman

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OPENING STATEMENT OF  
THE HONORABLE JOHN M. McHUGH  
MWR PANEL MARKUP

The purpose of today's meeting is to mark up the Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Panel's portion of H.R. 4205, the National Defense Authorization Bill for Fiscal Year 2001.

As always, I want to thank the Panel's ranking Democrat, Marty Meehan of Massachusetts, for his support and help in crafting this legislation. You all must think I'm a broken record on this subject, but the solidarity of this panel is remarkable. We have yet to have a partisan vote or issue during my tenure as chairman. That's because all panel members serve to help the troops and their families, not to advance a political agenda. Fellow MWR Panel members, I salute you.

Each year, the Panel focuses on a single major concern among the several items we consider. That way, we address issues in a responsible manner without throwing these very important programs that soldiers and their families depend on into unnecessary turmoil.

The MWR Panel in the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress has been consistent in its focus. We signaled last year that we wanted to fix the commissary surcharge problem. We who serve in the House are keenly aware that we are elected to two-year terms. While we would often like to take a longer view of things, the fact is that the MWR Panel as its presently constituted will not exist next year. Everyone knows that two of our stalwarts, Herb Bateman and Owen Pickett are retiring (they've approved everything in this mark by the way, so please don't tinker with their legacy).

With that in mind, I believe it is time to act to save the commissary system. And yes, I believe it's that serious. It used to be satisfactory to send soldiers to shop in abandoned warehouses, but we try to do better these days. Commissaries are the cornerstone of the MWR system. Commissaries draw customers to exchanges, which generate income for MWR programs, which remain under funded, despite recent progress. In short, we need to maintain decent commissaries to keep the commissary benefit and the entire MWR system viable, and I know this Panel wants to do that.

At this time last year, I said "I want to put everyone on notice—patrons, industry, and military leaders—that the MWR Panel is serious about its obligation to protect and preserve the MWR system and will consider all reasonable options to ensuring its survival." Now it's time to keep our promise.

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The mark addresses the commissary surcharge problem in two ways:

- First, we move utility, communications, information technology, and operating and supply and services expenses from the surcharge trust fund to the appropriated fund side of the ledger. Before the service budget personnel in the room get upset, let me say that the provision will be effective in fiscal year 2002. This delay will give the Department of Defense a year to budget for the change, and give DECA time to proceed with their cost reduction program. This shift should provide up to \$80 million dollars a year to the surcharge fund for much needed commissary renovation and construction.

- Second, the mark would authorize the sale of magazines as commissary items. Commissary patrons should be able to buy magazines and periodicals at the check out line, like they can at any other grocery store in the country. Current law requires that magazines be sold on consignment, an arrangement that proved to be unwieldy. This change would also add funds to the surcharge fund.

Our mark also addresses other issues:

- The Department of Defense recently changed its policy on official travel, a change that is costing Army MWR over \$14 million annually. I'm told the change was made in the name of consistency among the services. Well, consistency is nice, but hardly a compelling reason for making policy that impacts on MWR programs of the Army and Marine Corps. This mark directs the Secretary of Defense to review this policy.

- In our hearing, the Panel heard that clubs, for which the troops foot the bill, provide more and more support to official activities. I think that official use of MWR facilities is by and large a good idea, but appropriated funds should pay their fair share of the expense of maintaining clubs and other category C activities, to the degree that they support official functions. This mark directs the Secretary of Defense to review this situation and report back to the committee.

These and other items are addressed in this mark. Overall, I am pleased to offer this mark to our colleagues. I believe the provisions we have crafted go a long way towards accomplishing our objective of protecting and enhancing the benefit.

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